

THE NUMBERS CONTROVERSY

WE CAN'T TRUST THE BIBLE BECAUSE
THE BIG NUMBERS IN THE OLD
TESTAMENT ARE OBVIOUSLY UNTRUE

MOTIVATION FOR THE JOURNEY

“Christ wants a child’s heart, but a grown-up’s head. He wants us to be simple, single-minded, affectionate, and teachable, as good children are; but he wants every bit of intelligence we have to be alert at its job, in first-class fighting trim.”

C. S. Lewis

WHAT'S IN THE TEXT?

- 1Samuel 15:4 So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah.
 - 200,000 soldiers from most tribes
 - 10,000 more soldiers from Judah.

ANOTHER TEXT TO CONSIDER

- The entirety of Numbers chapter 1
- Numbers 1:20-21 The people of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, head by head, every male from twenty years old and upward, all who were able to go to war: those listed of the tribe of Reuben were 46,500.

NUMBERS CHAPTER 1 HAS LOTS OF NUMBERS!

Verse	Tribe	Men of War
1:20-21	Reuben	46,500
1:22-23	Simeon	59,300
1:24-25	Gad	45,650
1:26-27	Judah	74,600
1:28-29	Issachar	54,400
1:30-31	Zebulun	57,400
1:32-33	Ephraim	40,500
1:34-35	Manasseh	32,200
1:36-37	Benjamin	35,400
1:38-39	Dan	62,700
1:40-41	Asher	41,500
1:42-43	Naphtali	53,400
1:45-46	Total	603,550

NOTE THE INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

- If you do the math, the column really does add up to 603,550.
- That's good, because God should be able to do math correctly!
- But these numbers still present a substantial challenge.

THE HISTORIC PROBLEM

- Israel's army of 603,550 is enormous.
- Egypt's army at the time was about 80,000 ($1/7^{\text{th}}$ of Israel's)
- American Revolution: The colonies had about 20,000 at any one time ($1/30^{\text{th}}$ of Israel's)

THE HISTORIC PROBLEM

- Israel's army of 603,550 would have made for a total Hebrew population of about 2,000,000.
- Even allowing for miracles of mana, quail, and water, this is an enormous population to sustain without infrastructure in one place.
- The population of Israel did not reach 2,000,000 people until about 1950!

THE SCRIPTURAL PROBLEM

- Why was Israel (603,550) afraid of Egypt (80,000)?
- Doesn't seem like the Exodus was as big a deal if God delivered the mighty Israelites from the weak Egyptians!

THE SCRIPTURAL PROBLEM

- When they took possession of the land of Canaan, there were not enough of them to take possession of the whole land all at once.
- I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land.

Exodus 23:29-30

THE SCRIPTURAL PROBLEM

- God said the Hebrews were *not* numerous.
- Deuteronomy 7:6-8 “The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, *for you were the fewest of all peoples*, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers...

WHAT'S NOT THE PROBLEM?

- Some approach things like this to prove that the Bible is not true.
 - But every Word that God inspired is true.
- Some say such things are impossible, because miracles are impossible.
 - Miracles *can* happen because God is great.
 - Israel certainly could have grown to be a nation of 2,000,000 – if God simply decided to do so.

A CHRISTIAN APPROACH

- Trusting God. Jesus is the truth. All of God's Words are true.
- All true facts belong to God. And they don't contradict each other. So historic facts and Biblical facts, when rightly understood will not contradict each other.
- Using our minds. Perhaps there is a solution apparent to the problem now?
- Staying humble. Willing to wait, trusting God in cases where we may not have all the facts.

VARIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE

- The numbers are fictitious
 - Made up by the author to teach a lesson.
 - Charged by those attacking Scripture from outside the faith and, sadly, from within.
 - But if God's Word cannot be trusted to true historically, how can it be trusted to be true in any other way?
 - **This is NOT the way.**

VARIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE

- The numbers are only symbolic
 - But this is historic narrative (unlike Revelation) which purports to state facts.
 - If the people and places are facts, so too are the numbers.
 - They may have symbolism, true. But if so, they are first historic and then symbolic.
- Stating that they are only symbolic is **NOT the way.**

VARIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE

- The numbers are accurate
 - God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.
 - A possible solution, though it leaves troublesome intellectual questions.
 - Nonetheless, sometimes we must wait in faith until all the facts are known.
 - **This is a possible way.**

OUR ATTEMPT TO SOLVE

- The numbers are misunderstood.

I owe this to several references, but one stands out as particularly helpful:

“How Many People Were in the Exodus from Egypt?” by Colin J. Humphreys, *Science and Christian Belief*, Volume 12, No. 1, 2000, pages 17-34

A BRIEF LESSON ON ANCIENT HEBREW

- Only consonants in the original text.
- The original text is the inspired Word of God.
- No vowels were in written Hebrew until 1,000 years after some of the Old Testament was written.
- Vowels were added to the Old Testament so people would know how to say the words. *But the additions were not inspired. They were human additions.*

A BRIEF LESSON ON ANCIENT HEBREW

- אֶלֶף = the word we are considering
- Spoken something like “eLeF”
- LF has a range of meanings in the lexicons including “thousands” and “military units” and “clans”.*
- So at times, LF should be translated as thousand, and at other times as something like “squads”.

*The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 2018

A BRIEF LESSON ON ANCIENT HEBREW

- The text would be in Hebrew of course, but would look like this: “46LF and 500”
- 46LF and 500 could mean 46 thousand and 500
- 46LF and 500 could mean 46 squads and 500.
 - Or 500 men broken into 46 fighting squads.

LOOKING AGAIN AT THE NUMBERS IN NUMBERS.

Verse	Tribe	Men of War
1:20-21	Reuben	46,500
1:22-23	Simeon	59,300
1:24-25	Gad	45,650
1:26-27	Judah	74,600
1:28-29	Issachar	54,400
1:30-31	Zebulun	57,400
1:32-33	Ephraim	40,500
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LOOKING AGAIN AT THE NUMBERS IN NUMBERS.

Verse	Tribe	Men of War	Squads of men	Men of War
1:20-21	Reuben	46,500	46	500
1:22-23	Simeon	59,300	59	300
1:24-25	Gad	45,650	45	650
1:26-27	Judah	74,600	74	600
1:28-29	Issachar	54,400	54	400
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1:42-43	Naphtali	53,400	53	400
1:45-46	Total	603,550	598	5550

COULD A COPIEST HAVE MADE AN ERROR?

- Consider the TOTAL: 598 squads totaling 5500 men.
- That would be written:

598 LF and 5LF and 500.

- A Plausible error:

$598+5=603$ LF

- Copied text:

603LF and 500.

INTELLECTUALLY PLAUSIBLE

- Given the range of the meaning “LF”
- Given the fact that there were no vowels, and the original pronunciation (or pronunciations) may have been lost
- It is quite plausible that a scribe some 500 or 700 years later may have not understood the intention of the text and
fixed 598LF and 5LF and 500
to be 603LF and 500.

LOOKING AGAIN AT THE NUMBERS IN NUMBERS.

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IF THIS IS THE CASE:

- A misunderstanding of LF (thousand) and LF (squad) arose, which may have led to the introduction of a copy error in about 2 verses. (Num 1:46, 26:51)
- God's Word, as originally written, was 100% accurate, truthful, and factual.

IF THIS IS THE CASE:

- Israel had an army at the Exodus of 5,500.
- Israel's army was broken into 598 squads, or roughly 9 men per squad.
- Israel's total size at the Exodus was in the range of 20,000.

IF THIS IS THE CASE:

- This fits Israel being “the fewest of the nations”.
- This fits Israel being scared of Egypt.
- This fits Israel being unable to fill the Promised Land right away.
- This fits the historic understanding we have of army and population sizes at the time.

AND IF THIS IS THE CASE:

- 1 Samuel 15:4:
“So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, 200 *squads* of men on foot, and 10 *squads* of men of Judah.”
- If they still used squads of roughly 9 men, this was about 2,000 men total.
- This force had strength, but was far less than the 210,000 we may have thought, and was quite inferior to the Philistine threat.

SO IS THIS THE ANSWER?

- Perhaps.
- Even probably.
- But we should exercise caution in expressing too much certainty, when we are really discussing a theory about Scripture, not the Scripture itself.
- Our certainty is in God Himself far above our theories about how things might have been.

SO WHAT HAVE WE ACCOMPLISHED?

- We have demonstrated a plausible, intellectually satisfying solution to the “number problem”.
- We have shown - once again - that there is no reason whatsoever to think that the Scriptures are wrong.
- We have, hopefully, increased our faith in God’s Word. Did you notice how “in the weeds” this supposed problem is?
- We have debunked one of the atheists’ favorite talking points.
- We have worshiped God with our minds. Doing the work of defending our faith, even from our own doubts.

DO WE NEED TO KNOW THE ANSWER?

- I know some here Geek out over these things! (I'm with you!)
- But most of us don't *feel* like we need this.
- But I suggest that the world needs a church which tackles questions like this.
 - High school and college students
 - Those who will one day question their faith
 - For those who we evangelize